

Building Better Family Communication

Communication Tips

Practice these simple rules for better listening and communicating within your family:

Think before you speak. Take the time to contemplate your message. Do not react hastily to what someone says if you disagree. You may regret what you say. Children are very perceptive about pointing out inconsistencies and inaccuracies in your messages.

Be as clear as possible. Whether it is an expectation, emotion, question or other message, be very specific about what you are trying to express, especially with young children. Mixed and incomplete messages are very easy to misinterpret. Avoid sarcastic comments with double meanings like, "I really don't care what you do."

Stay on the topic. It is natural to want to avoid talking about the difficult things. Help family members stay on track by saying things like, "That is an interesting thought, but I would like to finish our discussion about ____ first." Avoid bringing up a litany of past offenses and stick to the topic of the moment.

Maintain consistent eye contact while talking and listening. Show your interest in what others have to say by following them with your eyes. Nodding occasionally gives the message that you are still with them.

Make your tone match your message. It is tempting to break up a serious discussion with laughter. Do not use humor to avoid a meaningful, serious topic. Humor has its important place, but it can diffuse your serious message.

Refrain from judging or disagreeing while listening. Instead, aim to understand. Avoid interrupting while someone is talking. Likewise, ask that a family member not interrupt you. Aim for healthy dialogue, not one-sided lectures.

Use "I" statements instead of judgmental and exaggerative "you" statements. For instance, instead of saying to your child, "You never listen to what we have to say," rephrase your message: "I feel that you're not listening carefully to what we have to say."

Avoid criticizing, ridiculing, embarrassing, whining at or nagging another family member. Demonstrate that fair, constructive and open dialogue is the best way to settle differences.

Give each person an equal say. Be sure to include every family member, especially young children.

Stress the respect of differences. Enforce your family rules, but allow each family member a healthy means of expressing disagreement.

Avoid speaking on behalf of another family member, unless they ask you to do so. Let that person indicate his or her own preferences and opinions.

Be consistent with your partner when communicating with children. Do not confuse a child by disagreeing or arguing with the other parent—discuss what you are going to talk about with the children beforehand, and decide who will lead the discussion.

Use Active Listening With Your Children

Therapists use a technique known as "active listening" to help patients express their feelings. As a parent, you can use this technique to help your children too.

Your kids want you to listen, not solve their problem for them. Your child comes home from school and says "None of the other kids like me." You respond, "Of course they do" and "You have to learn to love yourself first." You have just told your child that how he feels is incorrect and given him a solution that he has no hope of understanding.

Learn to be an active listener: In the example above simply saying, "You feel like you don't have any friends," lets your child know you understand how he feels. This encourages him to talk more about his hurt feelings and come up with solutions that will work for him.

Say less. Most of the time your child wants you to listen, not tell him what to do. Make yourself available, listen carefully, and demonstrate your sincere eagerness to understand and hear their story by saying, "Wow, go on!" "No kidding!" or "Mmmm...that's very interesting," or nothing at all.

Do not expect to come to a resolution for every problem. Just like the problems that adults face, children's issues will not always be resolved in one discussion. Some problems do not have simple and neat solutions. By not ending your discussion on a note of false hope, your children will get the message that you take it seriously too. This gives them a chance to work things out for themselves.

Communication with Teens: Things to Remember

1. Remember that during adolescence, communication generally decreases, and a child will confide less in parents. This is a fairly normal process. Don't overreact.
2. Listen to what is being said; that is, try to understand the teenager's feelings and where she is coming from versus thinking about arguments or responses.
3. Stop what you are doing and look at the teenager. Listen when she speaks to you. Turn the television off and put down the Blackberry.
4. Be sure most of your communication is positive, not negative. Don't dwell on mistakes, failures, misbehaviors or something they forgot to do. Give them positive communication and talk about their successes, accomplishments, interests and appropriate behavior.
5. Talk to them about their interests (e.g., music, sports, television shows, the latest video games or movies). Have conversations with them when you are not trying to make a point, to teach them something or to impress them. Talk to them just to talk and to have positive verbal interaction.

6. Avoid talking too much—giving long or too-detailed explanations, repeating lectures, questioning excessively or using other forms of communication that will result in your teenager not listening to you.
7. Try to understand the teen's feelings. You do not have to agree or disagree with him; just make him aware that you understand how he feels. Do not try to explain away his emotions.
8. Do not overreact to what is said. Remember, sometimes teenagers say things that are designed to get a reaction from their parents. In addition, do not say "no" too fast. Sometimes it is better to think about the request and give a response later. This shows you're listening and open to their thoughts and ideas.
9. Try to create situations in which communication can occur (making dinner, driving to the store, etc.).
10. Try to avoid power struggles, confrontation and arguing matches. Your goal should be to have the communication move toward a compromise situation, rather than a battle. When appropriate, involve the teenager in decision making and setting consequences for his or her behavior.

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